



EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY REMADE

Elevating Community Trust As the First
Principle of Accountability



ELEVATING COMMUNITY TRUST AS THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Trust is a critical condition for public education’s institutional survival and the first principle around which accountability systems must be constructed.

THE EAR TENTPOLE PAPER SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

Community trust is not a given. For much of the modern accountability era, policymakers have attempted to build public confidence in their schools through transparent reporting of student performance in math and reading on standardized tests. Paradoxically, while the system has made persistent disparities in outcomes more visible, modern accountability coincides with an erosion of confidence in public education that manifests in declining enrollment (Jacobs, 2026; Watson, 2025), organized opposition to policies (and sometimes, policymakers themselves), youth disengagement and absenteeism (Measure of America, 2025), declining educator morale (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020), and community alienation and detachment (PDK Poll, 2025).

The reason the current accountability paradigm hasn’t galvanized widespread engagement to produce better results is twofold: accountability measures have become increasingly misaligned with the broader range of what matters to communities, and the punitive nature of externally-driven accountability disenfranchises the very people who are most affected by what happens to their schools. State accountability ratings shape public perceptions of school quality. When these judgments rely on narrow measures that do not represent the full aspirations communities hold for their children, they strain the parental and professional trust on which good teaching depends. (National Educational Policy Center, 2023). And

when those judgments are handed down by a state department with few relational ties to the community in question, there is little opportunity to build collective responsibility for improvement.

A thriving public education system requires an accountability system worthy of public trust, which derives from the mutual assent of the system's participants rather than state compulsion alone. Mutual assent exists when those involved understand, agree to, and accept a shared direction or course of action, with each party having a meaningful opportunity to shape and consent to that agreement. Trust deter-

mines whether students engage and see assessment as an honest representation of their learning, whether families believe reported results, whether educators perceive their efforts as contributing to something they believe in, and whether communities oppose or support reforms, sustaining them through difficulty and leadership change.

Community trust should therefore be understood as both an outcome of an effective accountability system and a precondition for its continuous improvement. States and districts should retain common academic safeguards while building locally meaningful systems that engage stakeholders in shared governance and create transparency around students' learning experiences.

A trustworthy accountability model rests on three mutually reinforcing commitments:

- First, **educators and the communities served by schools should define outcomes that matter.**

Accountability systems are intended to provide the evidence upon which public trust in schools is built. This should include evidence that students are achieving foundational outcomes such as literacy and numeracy. It should also include a broader set of outcomes that matter locally and are increasingly recognized as essential in today's rapidly evolving society, such as the cross-disciplinary outcomes that many states and districts are embedding in Portraits of a Graduate.

- Second, **accountability should broaden what counts as credible evidence of learning.**

No test-centered system can, by itself, show whether students can apply knowledge, communicate complex ideas, solve unfamiliar problems, contribute to a team, or use what they know in consequential settings. Nor can a score report tell communities whether students

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experience belonging, gain access to challenging opportunities, or leave school ready to participate in civic, postsecondary, and professional life.

Demonstrating broader outcomes requires more robust forms of assessment that ask students to demonstrate those skills, such as performance-based assessment, portfolios, and capstone projects. It also means including other indicators of quality such as school culture, civic participation, postsecondary outcomes, or other indicators that matter to the families and communities entrusting schools to prepare their children for the future.

Building accountability around more authentic, performance-based assessments builds community trust by making learning visible. Whereas the current system communicates student performance through numeric test scores, performance-based assessments demonstrate proficiency and growth in ways that are tangible and therefore more easily understood.

Such an accountability system should continue to ensure equity, but as we show in a forthcoming paper, this need not require all assessments to be exactly the same. Even if standardized assessments play some continued but limited role as a check for equity, their use must be understood as one input and not privileged as the only trustworthy measure, and consequences must be carefully managed so as not to narrow focus or induce gaming at the expense of authentic learning, community trust, and system improvement.

- Third, **reciprocal community participation must be embedded in shared governance.**

A growing interdisciplinary body of research demonstrates that trust is built when accountability systems are participatory, transparent, and aligned to community-defined values, which are rooted in participants' assent rather than external compulsions. Foundational frameworks emphasize that effective systems must "measure what matters" to communities, incorporating outcomes such as well-being, engagement, and opportunity alongside academic achievement (National Academy of Medicine, 2021). Importantly, transparency alone is insufficient; data must be interpretable, usable, and embedded within relationships that enable communities to engage with and act on information (Open Data Policy Lab, 2020).

Research on community schools and family engagement further reinforces that trust develops when accountability is shared. Studies across states including Kentucky, New Mexico, Virginia, and New York show that co-created metrics and continuous feedback loops improve both outcomes and legitimacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2023; Learning Policy Institute, 2017). Foundational research by Henderson and Mapp (2002) demonstrates that authentic family engagement is strongly linked to student success and trust in schools. More

recent work highlights that accountability systems gain credibility when communities are involved in defining and validating success metrics, shifting accountability from external compliance to shared ownership (EdTrust, 2024).

These foundational commitments are the conditions through which community trust is cultivated and accountability becomes productive. Together, these commitments reposition accountability from a system that primarily renders judgments about schools to one that creates a shared understanding of their performance and a collective responsibility for their improvement. When communities have confidence in the evidence, recognize their aspirations in what is measured, and have a meaningful role in interpreting and acting on results, accountability becomes grounded in mutual assent—and capable of building, rather than merely demanding, public trust.

TRUST AS INFRASTRUCTURE FOR IMPROVEMENT

Trust is not the absence of scrutiny; communities are more likely to trust institutions that tell the truth about performance, make evidence understandable, acknowledge uncertainty, follow through on commitments, and demonstrate that public input changes decisions. Conversely, a system can publish extensive data and remain untrustworthy if the data are inaccessible, the measures do not reflect community priorities, or engagement occurs only after consequential decisions have already been made.

Meaningful engagement frameworks in non-education fields reinforce this distinction. The National Academy of Medicine's model, while developed in the health field, offers a useful cross-sector insight: community engagement becomes transformative as shared power, mutual value, inclusive participation, and community capacity increase (Figure 1). In education, this means moving beyond informing families toward involving them in defining success, selecting indicators, interpreting evidence, and determining responses. Community members' roles evolve from an audience for accountability to become partners in it.



Figure 1. Core principles of community engagement. (National Academy of Medicine, 2021).

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING COMMUNITY TRUST

A strong commitment to community trust and accountability should be judged by actions taken and not merely linguistic endorsements of community engagement. Nine indicators distinguish a substantive position from symbolic commitments.



- 01 **Establish a clear purpose.** Signal that accountability exists to improve student learning, ensure meaningful opportunities for all students, and fulfill a public covenant—not simply to rank schools or comply with reporting rules.
- 02 **Map the community.** Identify stakeholder groups, histories of participation and exclusion, existing networks, and trusted conveners.
- 03 **Co-create a public definition of student and system success.** Engage representatives from key stakeholder groups (especially those historically held furthest from decision-making tables) to create a shared definition of student and system success, grounded in both statewide academic standards and local aspirations.

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- 04 Create a balanced evidence architecture.** Audit current measures to determine what they reveal, what they distort, and what remains invisible. Then, prototype a small balanced set of indicators and authentic demonstrations, then test them for technical quality, cultural responsiveness, burden, and public intelligibility. Common assessments should remain as safeguards, but no high-stakes judgment should rest on a single score. Evidence may include authentic student work, growth, learning conditions, opportunity, experience, and postsecondary readiness.
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- 05 Ensure technical credibility.** Performance tasks and local measures should use shared standards, rubrics, exemplars, moderation, educator learning, and periodic validation. Broader evidence raises rather than removes the obligation to demonstrate validity, reliability, fairness, and accessibility (American Educational Research Association et al., 2014).
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- 06 Ensure all students remain visible.** Ensure that every indicator is disaggregated by relevant student groups; participation processes actively include communities that have experienced exclusion; and local flexibility cannot conceal lower expectations or unequal access.
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- 07 Enact shared governance and reciprocity.** Clearly define a role for community representatives before, during, and after decisions are made. Publish who participated, what was heard, what changed as a result of their participation, and why.
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- 08 Communicate progress with trustworthy transparency.** Report progress toward student outcome- and system-level goals in plain language, showing trends and uncertainty, linking system-level indicators to examples of student experience and work, and providing accessible ways for communities to ask questions and recommend action.
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- 09 Engage in continuous cycles of public learning and system refinement.** Continually improve the system through annual public review, ensuring that evidence leads to inquiry, resource allocation, intervention, and follow-up. The system reports not only outcomes but also what it is trying, what it is learning, and whether prior commitments produced improvement.



LEARNING FROM STATEWIDE EFFORTS

Several current statewide efforts are instructive. These state examples are not presented as comprehensive models of accountability reform, but as illustrations of states experimenting with different elements of a broader shift in how educational quality is defined, demonstrated, and communicated. Taken together, they illuminate both the possibilities and tensions inherent in building accountability systems that maintain common expectations while creating greater space for local priorities, community participation, and the mutual assent necessary to sustain public trust. While still evolving, these efforts provide valuable insights into both the opportunities and challenges of designing systems that are more meaningful, participatory, and responsive to local contexts.

KENTUCKY: LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY EFFORTS INFORM STATEWIDE POLICY



Kentucky offers one of the clearest examples of state-enabled, locally designed accountability. Kentucky is experimenting not simply with new measures, but with a different conception of accountability—one in which accountability is built through shared responsibility among state, local, and community actors. By giving communities a meaningful role in defining valued outcomes and direct access to evidence of student learning, the approach creates conditions for mutual assent and, ultimately, greater public trust in both the evidence and the system that produces it. Through Kentucky United We Learn and the Local Laboratories of Learning, districts and community partners are developing assessment and accountability systems responsive to local aspirations while contributing to a statewide

model. A defining strength of the Kentucky United We Learn Council is the diversity of its membership, bringing together students, families, educators, district leaders, community members, employers, and other partners whose varied perspectives help ensure that the Commonwealth's vision for education reflects the aspirations and experiences of the people it serves. Kentucky's process has included a diverse statewide council, regional town halls, district prototypes, and local coalitions. Participating districts are piloting demonstrations of learning and measures tied to locally developed portraits of a learner.

Across Kentucky, an increasing number of districts are implementing authentic assessment approaches—including performance tasks, exhibitions of learning, and defenses of learning—that are aligned with locally developed Portraits of a Learner. In many districts, the defense of learning serves as the culminating assessment experience, requiring students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 12 to present evidence of their learning and reflect on their demonstrated proficiency in competencies such as communication, collaboration, citizenship, and critical thinking. These events are attended by educators, families, community members, and local employers, positioning assessment as a public demonstration of learning rather than a private evaluation of student performance.

The scale of community participation in these events is notable. On defense days, school facilities are often filled with students preparing to present, educators facilitating the process, families observing student learning, and community partners serving as audience members and panelists. This level of participation provides stakeholders with direct access to evidence of student learning and creates opportunities to observe not only the products students have produced, but also their ability to articulate, justify, and reflect upon their learning. In this way, defenses of learning increase the transparency of educational practice while fostering shared understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that communities value most.

The significance of the model lies not only in its measures but also in its architecture: the state supplies direction and support, districts test approaches in context, and communities help define the qualities and evidence that matter (Kentucky Department of Education, 2026).

The Future of Assessment and Accountability in Kentucky

Districts will design and implement local accountability systems - with state and peer support - on a timeline that sets everyone up for success.

1

Pilot Phase

Continue with a representative pilot group of districts to design and implement local accountability systems. This phase focuses on testing key components, gathering feedback, identifying challenges, and refining processes.

2

Expansion Phase

Expand local accountability systems to more districts, applying lessons from the pilot. State invests in high-quality professional learning systems and strong communities of practice for local system design and stakeholder engagement.

3

Sustainability Phase

Local accountability systems are scaled across the state with active networks for shared learning, system review, and continuous improvement.

Additionally, Kentucky has launched a statewide strategic dashboard that captures a broader range of indicators designed to reflect the Commonwealth's commitment to Vibrant Learning and locally developed Portrait of a Learner efforts (Kentucky Department of Education, 2026). This matters for trust because a multidimensional display is more accurate about complexity and directs attention toward specific efforts rather than attaching a single label to a school (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). These multiple forms of evidence need not be collapsed into a single judgment of school quality; when standardized measures and authentic demonstrations point in different directions, the divergence itself is important evidence, prompting deeper inquiry into what students know and can do, the conditions under which they demonstrate that learning, and what each measure is—and is not—capturing.

NEW YORK: A NETWORKED APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE-BASED LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT



While not explicitly focused on changing the state accountability model, New York's Performance-Based Learning and Assessment Networks (PLAN) Pilot offers a timely example of a state's prototyping movement towards a modern set of aligned measures for school and student achievement as the dominant evidence of school and student achievement. Launched with 23 middle schools, high schools, and Board of Cooperative Educational

Services (BOCES) programs representing varied regions, sizes, and student populations, PLAN organizes participating schools into networks that receive professional learning, technical assistance, and support from mentor schools. The networks are testing three pathways: career and technical education with work-based learning; inquiry-based learning connected to learner profiles; and project-based learning with performance-based assessment tasks.

Across these approaches, students demonstrate mastery by applying knowledge to complex problems, producing substantive work, explaining their thinking, and responding to feedback—evidence that can reveal readiness for college, career, and civic life more authentically than a single standardized score. Importantly, PLAN is not simply introducing new tasks. It is studying the instructional practices, school culture, educator capacity, community engagement, regulatory flexibility, and quality-assurance structures needed to ensure performance-based learning and assessment are accessible, credible, and scalable across diverse schools and student populations. As an active pilot, it should not yet be treated as proof of statewide outcomes; its value is as a disciplined research-and-development model through which state policy, local innovation, and networked professional learning can shape a more balanced assessment system (New York State Education Department, 2024, 2026).

From an accountability perspective, PLAN illustrates how states can create structured space to test forms of evidence that may eventually broaden what the public can see and understand about student and school performance. Its attention to community engagement and quality assurance is particularly relevant to public trust: new measures will strengthen accountability only to the extent that stakeholders understand, value, and have confidence in the evidence they produce.

NEW MEXICO: COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AS COMPREHENSIVE IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY



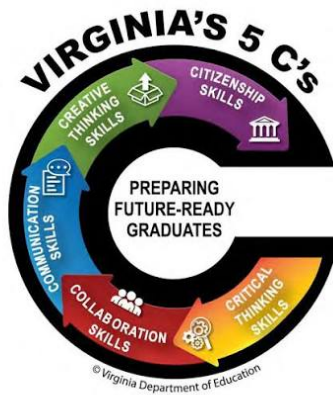
New Mexico has developed a nationally significant example of this comprehensive approach. In response to persistent disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes underscored by the Yazzie/Martínez court ruling, the state has invested in community schools as hubs of learning, health, family engagement, and community partnership. The model integrates rigorous academic support, expanded learning opportunities, health and social supports, culturally and linguistically responsive practice, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership. A 2025 Learning Policy Institute study of state-supported sites

in Albuquerque, Peñasco, and Roswell found improvement across multiple indicators, including test-score growth, graduation, chronic absence, student engagement and connectedness, school climate, access to physical and mental health care, and family engagement. The strongest implementation moves beyond coordinating services to establishing authentic structures through which students, families, educators, and community partners share power in the process of codesigning responses to local priorities. New Mexico's experience suggests that community schools are most effective not as an add-on program, but as a comprehensive improvement strategy that addresses academic learning and the conditions that enable students to thrive (Germain et al., 2025).

From an accountability perspective, New Mexico illustrates how public trust can be strengthened when communities are not simply recipients of school improvement efforts, but participants in defining priorities, shaping responses, and examining evidence of progress. This shared responsibility broadens accountability beyond reporting outcomes to the public toward creating structures through which schools and communities are mutually accountable for improving both student outcomes and the conditions that produce them.

VIRGINIA: SUPPORTING LOCAL INNOVATIVE LEARNING MODELS

Virginia's emerging work illustrates both progress and the unfinished nature of the transition from a state accountability system based upon student performance on decontextualized standardized state tests to criteria grounded in multiple measures. The Commonwealth's School Performance and Support Framework reports proficiency, growth, readiness, and engagement-related measures, while local divisions increasingly use Portraits of a Graduate or Learner to define competencies such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and citizenship. Virginia is also exploring innovative assessment approaches, including substituting locally scored, performance-based options for state-wide traditional standardized tests in some content areas. The opportunity now is to connect these strands: locally co-designed learner outcomes should be supported by credible demonstrations and public reporting, while statewide measures continue to protect common expectations and visibility into group-level outcomes. In particular, Virginia has enacted a law authorizing local school boards to utilize maximal flexibility in use of time in districts. This provides districts with the capability to utilize place-based education, work-based experiences, project-based learning, compacted and expanded course time based on individual needs, and alternative time for learning. Virginia's emerging work demonstrates that innovation in learning and innovation in accountability are mutually dependent. As schools create richer opportunities for students, accountability systems must also evolve to provide credible evidence of those experiences and the outcomes they produce, thereby strengthening public trust in the education system.



Virginia's emerging work highlights that innovation in learning and innovation in accountability are mutually dependent; sustaining trust requires credible evidence of both common academic expectations and the broader outcomes communities increasingly value.

DESIGN CHALLENGES AND NECESSARY GUARDRAILS

The move toward local and authentic accountability is demanding. Trust is not produced by accountability measures alone. Instead, it is produced through the process of collectively deciding what is worth measuring, how evidence should be gathered, and how that evidence will be used to improve learning. But many districts have had limited opportunity to develop assessment literacy, design high-quality performance measures, facilitate inclusive engagement, or calibrate evidence across classrooms. States can take three critical steps to build capacity and ensure quality across their systems:

Local ownership without capacity will produce uneven quality; mandates without capacity will reproduce compliance.

- States should fund common rubrics and exemplars, moderation networks to establish consistent practices and scoring, technical assistance, community-engagement infrastructure, and protected time for educators and partners to learn together. Local ownership without capacity will produce uneven quality; mandates without capacity will reproduce compliance.
- Comparability also requires careful design. Local measures can reflect community context, but each student remains entitled to ambitious expectations. A sound model uses a "common spine, local expression" approach: statewide standards, reporting requirements, and technical criteria form the spine, while districts select additional priorities and

develop locally meaningful ways for students to demonstrate them. Periodic external review and cross-district calibration can build confidence without forcing every community into an identical model.

- Systems must also guard against “engagement theater.” Listening sessions held after decisions, advisory groups without authority, opaque sampling, and reports that do not explain how input was used can deepen distrust. A credible engagement process establishes decision boundaries at the outset, recruits beyond familiar participants, removes barriers to participation, returns findings to the community for validation, and maintains a public response log.

Finally, leaders should resist replacing one reductive index with another. Combining many indicators into a single rating can obscure the very differences a broader system is meant to reveal. Public-friendly, rigorous dashboards should display a concise set of dimensions, trends, and disparities, accompanied by narrative interpretation and examples of learning. The goal is disciplined judgment, not false precision. The outcome must be credible, carefully chosen evidence.

MEASURING TRUST

Community trust should itself be monitored, but not reduced to a single survey item. A trust evidence set can include representative surveys; participation and representation data; qualitative accounts from students and families; responsiveness to questions and complaints; completion of public commitments; perceptions of respect, competence, integrity, and care; and evidence that community recommendations influenced policy, practice, or resource allocation. These indicators should be reviewed across stakeholder groups because trust is not evenly distributed among communities within a system. A favorable districtwide average can mask deep distrust among communities with histories of exclusion.

Leadership behavior will ultimately determine whether the model earns credibility. Leaders build trust when they share consequential information early, admit what is not working, invite disagreement, explain constraints, protect dissenting voices, and demonstrate follow-through. They lose trust when engagement is episodic, technical language shields decisions, or data are used mainly to defend the institution. The measure of a trustworthy system is not whether conflict disappears. It is whether people believe the process is fair, the evidence is honest, and their participation has consequences.

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CONCLUSION

The future of educational accountability should not force a false choice between common standards and local meaning, between technical quality and authentic learning, or between professional expertise and community voice. A better system holds these values together. It retains common measures where they preserve comparability and ensure that all students remain visible within the system; adds authentic evidence that reveals what students can do; broadens the public definition of success; and distributes authority so communities participate in determining what evidence means and what action should follow.

The demonstrated models are still evolving, and none should be copied without attention to context. Together, however, they establish a credible direction. Kentucky shows how states can create room for district-community laboratories. NY PLAN demonstrates the diagnostic power of a multidimensional system grounded in prototyping change that can become sustainable and widespread. New Mexico's community schools show how shared leadership can turn accountability into collective responsibility. Virginia's emerging assessment and readiness work offers an opportunity to join common expectations with locally meaningful outcomes.

This transformation is not a retreat from accountability. It is an argument for accountability that is more rigorous because it is more complete, more transparent because people can understand the evidence, and more legitimate because the public has a meaningful role in shaping it.

Elevating community trust as a first principle for accountability restores the democratic purpose of public education. Public schools are accountable not only for producing scores but also for developing capable young people, ensuring all students have meaningful opportunities to learn and succeed, learning transparently, and honoring the communities they serve.

This transformation is not a retreat from accountability. It is an argument for accountability that is more rigorous because it is more complete, more transparent because people can understand the evidence, and more legitimate because the public has a meaningful role in shaping it.

When states and districts make those commitments visible and share power over how they are measured and pursued, community trust becomes more than a communications goal; it becomes a durable capacity for improvement.

This paper was authored by Pam Moran, Executive Director of the Virginia School Consortium for Learning, and Karen Perry, Executive Director of the University of Kentucky Center for Next Generation Leadership, with editing by Jenny Poon and contributions from the Project EAR team.

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